DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 270 833 CS 505 322

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TITLE Communication Competence in Public Relations' Management Counseling Function.
PUB DATE 19 Apr 86
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Speech Association (Cincinnati, OH, April 17-19, 1986).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; Discussion; Group Dynamics; Higher Education; Human Services; Nonverbal Communication; Organizational Communication; Persuasive Discourse; *Public Relations; *Speech Communication; Verbal Communication
IDENTIFIERS Audience Awareness; *Management Counseling

ABSTRACT

A need exists for development of communication competence as a part of management. Although public relations literature has dealt with the nature of management counseling and when and why it should be practiced, the literature has not clearly defined the importance of audience analysis, location of the management counseling sessions, and presentation design in determining the success of management counseling sessions. Public relations articles, books, and university degree programs have tended to focus on the gathering, analysis, writing, and physical design of information, neglecting the fact that a great deal of public relations practitioners' success depends on their oral and nonverbal communication. Management counseling is just one excellent example of a vital aspect of public relations in which success is enhanced through application of theories and methodologies traditionally ascribed to speech communication. Therefore, as the practice of public relations continues its rapid movement and expansion toward promotion and management, the field of speech communication should be recognized as increasingly important to the education of future practitioners and the upgrading of practitioner abilities. (DF)

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COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS' MANAGEMENT COUNSELING FUNCTION

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Presented at the 1986 Annual Convention of
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April 19, 1986
Cincinnati, Ohio

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Dr. Gay Wakefield served as public relations and advertising director for the Hyatt Regency/Reunion Tower/Union Station complex (Dallas), as copywriter for the Dallas office of DBG&H Unlimited, Inc., as owner of Expressions Unlimited (Arlington, Texas) and of Liaison Communication (Commerce, Texas), as head of the public relations curriculum at Central Missouri State University prior to her current post as director of the public relations degree program at Southern Illinois University (Carbondale, Illinois). She is faculty advisor to the SIU chapter of the Public Relations Student Society of America and to SIU's student agency, Pyramid Public Relations, and is owner of Wakefield Associates (Murphysboro, Illinois).

Abstract

This manuscript centers on the need for development of communication competence in management counseling. The author acknowledges that public relations literature has faithfully reported "what" management counseling is and "when" and "why" it should be practiced, but charges that public relations literature has neglected equal attention to the "who," "where," and "how" of effective management counseling sessions. The majority of the manuscript is devoted to discussing various approaches to the "who," "where," and "how" of successful public relations' management counseling.

Communication Competence in Public Relations' Management Counseling Function

by

Gay Wakefield

The management counseling function is now recognized as vital to successful public relations efforts. Competent public relations experts and educators realize that effective crisis and issue management require the PR officer to accept responsibility for bringing relevant issues and concerns before his/her organizational management--preferably before they become crises--and to guide management toward responsible decisions regarding those issues and concerns. Replacing the yes-man mold with the social catalyst role of public relations is essential if organizations are to function responsibly in contemporary society.

Public relations literature in the management counseling arena cautions that sound public relations ethics and theories in environmental

scanning, media relations, and other essential aspects of public relations management must provide the direction for effective management counseling.[1] The usual definitions, lists, and recommendations are covered in this literature, providing guidance for the PR counselor's decisions regarding what position s/he should take in the management couseling encounter.

However--as has been true in many aspects of public relations--the major focus has been on the gathering and organization of information, neglecting theories for effecting individual acceptance of that information. Public relations education and practice continue to shift from the narrow journalistic approaches for publicity of toward the broader public relations management communication approaches of today and tomorrow. So must PR theory and methodology expand past information gathering, writing, and dissemination to address the interpersonal and group communication arenas of modern public relations.

The "what," "when," and "why" of management counseling have been addressed repeatedly in public relations literature, but these factors--as important as they are--tell only half the story in management counseling

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[1]For examples, see Close, H. W., "Public Relations as a Management Function," Public Relations Journal, March, 1980, 11-14; Cooper, Michael, "Crisis Public Relations," Public Relations Journal, November, 1981, 52-53, 56-57; Riggs, Lew, "Present and Future Trends in Public Relations," Public Relations Quarterly, Summer, 1982, 5-9; Horne, Grant N., "Mediating Conflict in a Crisis," Public Relations Journal, January, 1983, 22-23; Cantor, Bill, "1984: The Year Ahead," Public Relations Journal, 12-15; Jackson, Patrick, "Tomorrow's Public Relations," Public Relations Journal, March, 1985, 24-25; Moore, H. Frazier and Frank B. Kalupa, Public Relations: Principles, Cases, and Problems (Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1985), 7-8, 63-69; "Issue Alert: Concern about Hazardous Chemicals Spills into Workplace," Public Relations Journal, March, 1986, 15-16; Wilcox, Dennis L., Phillip H. Ault and Warren K. Agee, Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986), 312-315.

effectiveness. Little has been offered concerning the "who," "where," and "how" which are so central to competent communication in management counseling. To assure the best possible management decisions regarding the "what," "when," and "why," the public relations officer must present the information in a manner conducive to effective decision-making in the specific situation. Such communication competence necessitates application of various communication theories toward management of the "who," "where," and "how" of management counseling.

WHO

Demographic and psychographic analysis of the specific management personnel to be addressed is an essential first step in designing the communication for a particular management counseling session.[2] The answers to the following questions provide a logical starting point.

1. Will the individuals to be counseled be the PR practitioner's peers? Will they be his/her superiors? Will any of them be in lower management positions than s/he holds?

2. How do the educational backgrounds of these managers compare to the practitioner's?

3. What is the group's gender mix, and how does the practitioner fit into that mix?

4. What is the age range of the group, and how does the practitioner's age compare?

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[2]See Goodall, H. Lloyd, Jr. and Christopher L. Waagen, The Persuasive Presentation: A Practical Guide to Professional Communication in Organizations (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986), 21-38.

5. What are the relationships between the practitioner and the individuals to be counseled? Are the directions to be recommended by the PR officer likely to be a "hard sell" considering these relationships?

6. Which individuals are likely to be supportive of the practitioner's recommendations? How do these individuals fit into the organizational power structure? How vocal will they likely be in their support? Which unsupportive managers are likely to be swayed by the support of these individuals?

7. What concerns, questions, and arguments are likely to be raised by the individuals to be counseled by the PR officer? What persuasive appeals are likely to work with this group?

8. Would this group respond best to individual meetings with the practitioner, to small-group sessions where supportive managers are grouped with those most influenced by those managers, or to a large-group session with everyone involved in the decision gathered in one place? Would a mixed approach work best for the specific situation, perhaps meeting with key infuentials to gain their support before holding a large-group decision-making session?

Once these questions are answered, the public relations professional should consider any other audience-related questions which might be relevant to the particular management group to be counseled. When the audience analysis is completed, it is time to determine the "where" of the management counseling situation.

WHERE

Location of the management counseling session is not to be taken lightly by the public relations practitioner. The physical field of the

communication can help to predetermine management's mindset regarding the information to be presented by the practitioner. The size of the group to be addressed will certainly influence location for the meeting, but there are other important factors to be considered before deciding where to hold the conference.[3]

If the public relations officer decided in audience analysis that an individual approach was appropriate, the meeting may have more positive results if it is held in his/her own office. "Home-court advantage" often makes the management counseling game easier to win psychologically, particularly if the opponent is expected to be predisposed negatively toward the recommendations to be made. Should it be impossible to hold the meeting in the PR practitioner's office, a neutral turf such as a small conference room or a quiet restaurant is a suitable replacement. It is usually wise to avoid meeting the adversarial manager in his/her office.

When a group session is preferred, a number of specifics must be considered. If the public relations person expects a difficult time with any of the managers involved, a meeting room with a traditional conference table is preferred over one with a more democratic set-up.[4] In such situations it is essential that the PR officer maintain control, and the power seat at the head of the table is one important advantage. If for some reason it should be inappropriate for the public relations counselor to sit at the head of the table, the secondary power position at the foot of the table or the center-side seats should be secured. The practitioner should bear in mind that the

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[3]Borman, Ernest G., Discussion and Group Methods Theory and Practice (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), 45-50.
[4]Gibson, Jan Whitney and Richard W. Hodgetts, Organizational Communication: A Managerial Perspective (New York: Academic Press College Division, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1986), 367-369.

ability to establish eye contact with as many managers as possible enhances the persuasiveness of the presentation,[5] and sitting in the positions recommended significantly enhances the opportunities for eye contact.

During audience analysis, determination should have been made regarding which individuals are likely to be supportive and which will probably be argumentative. It is good strategy to arrange the seating for the session so that supportive managers are seated in two's or three's to provide them support groups. Argumentative managers can often be discouraged from dissenting by separating them from one another and surrounding them with individuals supportive of the practitioner's presentation. When there are too many dissenters to make such isolation possible, it may be helpful to seat them next to other argumentative types with whom they do not usually get along or with whom they are not likely to want to agree publicly.

To assure that the managers sit where the practitioner has determined they should, individualized information packets--complete with the manager's name in large letters on the cover--can be placed at each seat. Any extra chairs should be removed from the room to discourage managers from moving their positions. As the managers arrive for the meeting, the PR officer--who should always arrive in plenty of time to check the equipment and room set-up, and correct any problems with the room prior to manager arrival--can reinforce the seating plan by "helping" individuals find their places (for instance, "Francis, your packet is there next to Bob."). Pointing out the seating for a few of the managers should establish a norm that encourages the others to look for their packets before sitting.

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[5]Goodall and Waagen, 76-77; Hasling, John, Group Discussion and Decision Making (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1975), 108.

Seating arrangement is only one factor to be weighed when choosing a meeting room for a management counseling session. The colors and lighting patterns should create a comfortable atmosphere conducive to positive interaction. Avoidance of such stimulants as orange decor and glaring lights is advisable.[6] The perceived temperature of the room, and your ability to control it, is important. When temperatures rise, so do tempers. A cool atmosphere, in temperature, lighting, and color, provides a setting more favorable for agreement.[7] Having plenty of ice water and glasses on the table before the meeting starts can help in this regard, while hot coffee can stimulate the opposite effect.

While the "where" of the management counseling session can provide a positive setting, the public relations officer must personally present the information in an appealing manner acceptable to those managers attending. Hence, the "how" is crucial.

HOW

The "who" and "where" of the management counseling session will largely dictate the "how." Though it may be tempting to work out details of the presentation first, the effectiveness of that presentation will normally be more in line with the desired outcomes if audience and setting specifics are taken into account during presentation design.

The persuasive appeals to be used should be directly related to the demographic and psychographic analyses of the managers to be counseled.

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[6]DeVito, Joseph A., Communicology: Concepts and Practices (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976), 120-121.

[7]Verderber, Rudolph F. and Kathleen S. Verderber, Inter-Act: Using Interpersonal Communication Skills (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1983), 94-95.

The public relations practitioner should be well enough acquainted with the management group to know what arguments will be most positively received in the particular interpersonal and political environment of the organization.[8]

Similarly, the tone of the message and specific wording to be employed are extremely important considerations at this stage in preparation.[9] Sensitivity to semantics and style approaches for the written and oral presentations is essential for ensuring the best possible acceptance rate among the receivers of the practitioner's message. Frequently the particulars of what is said have less impact on the decision-making process than does the manner in which they are expressed.[10]

The PR counselor should prepare responses to every foreseeable concern, question, and argument that s/he can imagine might arise during the management counseling session. A solid cost/benefit analysis should be prepared, and is particularly important when decisions are to be made concerning the handling of crises (current or potential) and emerging issues. Explication of realistic worst- and best-case scenarios, complete with the resulting impact on individual managers, departmental operations, and the organization as an entity, helps managers to more readily grasp the seriousness of the decisions to be made. Asking the question "How are we prepared to handle this eventuality?" brings the scenario to a personal level requiring responsible decision-making from the managers involved. The public relations officer should be prepared to guide discussion toward

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[8]Goodall and Waagen, 21-28, 106-107; Hasling, 120-131.
[9]Gibson and Hodgetts, 103-107.
[10]Hasling, 48-50; Verderber and Verderber, 75-78; Finn, David, "Struggle for Ethics in Public Relations," Harvard Business Review, January-February, 1959, 9-11.

specific and effective solutions in order to expedite concurrence on a sound policy decision.[11]

Successful management counseling requires that the PR counselor establish him/herself as an authority on the issue being considered. It should never be assumed or communicated that the other managers know less about the topic,[12] but the public relations practitioner must assure that there is not important information s/he has not digested prior to the meeting. Failure to thoroughly understand the subject can rapidly doom the management counseling session--as well as the practitioner's future with the organization.

Support materials for the presentation should be complete, but simply organized and easy to follow. In addition to any audio/visual tools to be employed and written materials to be given to the managers, back-up files and materials should be taken to the session and should be organized for quick reference in case the managers need or want additional information on a particular point. Frequent use of quotations from experts the managers are known to respect enhances the acceptability of the support materials, particularly if such quotes are reinforced in the oral presentation.[13]

The management counseling session should be carefully orchestrated by the public relations officer, with an explicit agenda established prior to

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[11]For methods, see Hasling, 38-44; Borman, Ernest G. and Nancy C. Borman, Speech Communication: A Basic Approach (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986), 119-120; Myers, Gail E. and Michele T. Myers, The Dynamics of Human Communication: A Laboratory Approach (New York: McGraw-Hill Company, 1985), 311-314.

[12]Newsom, Doug and Alan Scott, This is PR: The Realities of Public Relations (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1985), 444.

[13]Hasling, 24-25.

the meeting.[14] Discretion should be used in sharing that detailed agenda. It is often more effective to share with the managers an abbreviated agenda with little detail in order to maintain maximum control of the meeting. A general knowledge of what to expect and how long the meeting will last is sufficient advance agenda for most situations.[15]

The actual management of the meeting requires strong skills in nonverbal communication, presentational speaking, and group leadership. The public relations manager must look, act, and sound like the expert if s/he expects to maintain control of the situation. Thoughtful preparation, attention to details, and rehearsal can only help.[16]

Personal appearance must be professional and matched in style and color to the desired manager response.[17] For instance, the public relations respresentative feeling the need to establish a strong power position might wear a suit and accessories in brown tones; the practitioner wishing to be perceived as the source of safety and security might dress in a navy suit; the PR officer desiring an image of purity in thought and action might choose to dress in lighter colors and fabrics with white or cream prominent in the ensemble.[18] Whatever the specific outfit worn, grooming and general appearance should present an unhesitating, rested, confident, businesslike approach--regardless of the realities of an all-night, frantic, rushed effort to get everything ready for the management counseling session.

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[14]Borman and Borman, 119-120; Gibson and Hodgetts, 369-371; Hasling, 92-94, 96-98, 106.
[15]Hasling, 104-105.
[16]Gibson and Hodgetts, 93-103, 371-375; Goodall and Waagen 81-89.
[17]Goodall and Waagen, 83-84; Verderber and Verderber, 96-97.
[18]Luscher, Max, The Luscher Color Test (New York: Pocket Books, 1969).

The public relations practitioner's presentational style should also reflect confidence and ability. For instance, a decision must be made regarding whether to make the presentation from a standing or seated position.[19] Remaining seated provides a one-of-the-gang approach and is less taxing for long sessions. On the other hand, standing when others are seated provides a psychological position of superiority and power and allows more release of nervous energy. The specific situation to be encountered should guide this decision. In some instances the preferable choice might be to mix standing and seated positions at various, predetermined points in the presentation.

Though it is normal to be nervous during a stressful management counseling meeting, nerves must be controlled and channeled into energy in order to avoid communication of nonverbal messages which appear contradictory to the desired verbal message. Body stance, posture, movements, and gestures--whether standing or seated--must be strong, but not stiff or unnatural. Nervous mannerisms such as lip licking, pen clicking, finger tapping, pacing, and change jingling must be bypassed. Vocal/verbal pauses such as "you know," "um," "and uh," and the like must be controlled. Strong eye contact must be established and maintained with each manager present. The material to be presented must be so familiar to the PR counselor that the information can be shared effectively without reliance on reading a manuscript or shuffling through endless note cards.

Throughout the session, it is vital that the public relations practitioner remain attuned to the subtle feedback managers provide to the various points covered. The ability during the actual presentation to attend to such nonverbal cues as raised or knitted eyebrows, body blocking, or evasive eye

[19]Gibson and Hodgetts, 98-103; Goodall and Waagen, 74-77.

contact provides the practitioner the opportunity to immediately adapt the message to overcome problems such as need for clarification or overkill on a point. As is true in all public relations planning, flexibility must be built into the presentation to allow for such adaptation.

The appropriate method for handling verbal questions or comments will depend on the specific situation. If managers are likely to interrupt frequently concerning points addressed later in a carefully ordered presentation, the public relations officer may wish to ask that all questions and comments be held until the presentation is completed. If the presentation is designed for maximum flexibility so that various points can be covered effectively without sticking to the orchestrated agenda, the PR person may prefer to take comments and questions as they arise in an attempt to head off manager frustration and diffuse opposition. The psychological advantages of aligning with, or breaking from, the organizational norm regarding leadership and meeting styles should also be considered.[20]

Certainly, the "how" of management counseling is an intricate and individualized process dependent on the specifics of the particular situation. Its success is also dependent on the sensitivities and communicative abilities of the public relations counselor handling the session.

CONCLUSION

In addition to knowledge and analytic abilities regarding the "what," "when," and "why" of management counseling, the public relations manager must master theoretical foundations and performance abilities regarding the "who," "where," and "how" if s/he is to maximize management counseling

[20]Goodall and Waagen, 107-112; Hasling, 39.

effectiveness. Unfortunately, public relations literature and education have generally passed over the communication theory and training basic to the "who," "where," and "how" of management counseling.

Public relations articles, books, and university degree programs have tended to focus on the gathering, analysis, writing, and physical design of information, neglecting the fact that a great deal of a public relations practitioner's success depends on his/her oral and nonverbal communication. Management counseling is just one excellent example of a vital aspect of public relations in which success is greatly enhanced through application of theories and methodologies traditionally grouped under the umbrella of speech communication. Other equally good examples are media relations, the role of spokesperson, recruitment, employee communications, speech making, account service--in fact, nearly every imaginable aspect of public relations.

As the practice of public relations continues its rapid movement and expansion toward promotion and management, the field of speech communication should be recognized as increasingly important to the education of future practitioners and the upgrading of practitioner abilities. Individuals can enhance their success factor in management counseling and other areas of public relations by pursuing communication literature and course work in such areas as interpersonal communication, small group communication and leadership, organizational communication, presentational and public speaking, speech writing, nonverbal communication, audience analysis and adaptation, persuasion, rhetoric, semantics, and power communication.